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SUBJECT: US ELECTION RESULTS OVERSHADOW NEW ZEALAND  
ELECTORAL CONTEST

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The election of Barack Obama was greeted enthusiastically in New Zealand with extensive press coverage and media commentary. The Embassy-sponsored election viewing events on November 5 in Auckland and Wellington had large crowds who watched the election returns and speeches by John McCain and President-elect Obama. Both speeches were well-received and some GNZ officials lamented that their own political contest lacked the electricity and historic nature of the US election. Both Prime Minister Clark and opposition leader John Key drew encouragement from the U.S. election results; Clark noting that the Democratic Party victory was evidence of a swing to the left in the U.S. and Key comparing Obama's win to the New Zealand public's desire for change. End Summary.

Kiwis Celebrate Obama Victory  
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¶2. (U) At a U.S. Embassy-hosted event at Wellington's civic center, over three hundred invited guests joined with the Ambassador and other mission staff to watch the election returns on CNN and Fox Network. The turnout was exceptional, and New Zealand television, radio, and print media participated, interviewing Embassy officials as well as guests for their reactions throughout the evening. The Ambassador characterized the election as a great example of democracy, along with the recent election in Canada and upcoming polls in New Zealand. New Zealand politicians and government officials from a variety of ministries were present, as were embassy officials from other diplomatic missions in New Zealand, students from Victoria University and leading New Zealand opinionmakers.

¶3. (U) ConGen Auckland also hosted a capacity crowd event, which included close to ninety members of Auckland's American, academic, business, consular, and media communities in the Consulate offices. Two Members of Parliament (Labour's Judith Tizard and National's Tim Groser) took time from busy campaign schedules to watch the election results and stayed most of the evening.

¶4. (SBU) John McCain's concession speech was uniformly applauded by audiences at both events, with guests praising the gracious content, particularly the sympathy the Republican candidate extended to Obama over the recent death of his grandmother. Obama's speech got rave reviews from audience members, many of whom commented on how excited they were to be watching an event of historic significance. A number of guests teared up during Obama's speech. One NGO leader was elated, saying that Obama's victory represented a turning point for the United States. Labour and National party participants were happy although one senior Labour staff member privately worried that the U.S. move for change might be replicated in the coming weekend elections in New Zealand. A former National speaker of Parliament greeted Obama's election enthusiastically; a few people were McCain supporters and admitted some disappointment, but nevertheless

thought Obama's election would be positive for the U.S. image worldwide. An MFAT official told of an election-watching party within one of the ministry's divisions and another contact said her sister, who is a senior MFAT official, left work early to go home and watch the U.S. election returns.

#### U.S. Results Dominate News

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15. (U) Media reporting of the U.S. election results on November 6 dominated all outlets, overshadowing other major stories -- even New Zealand's elections in two days. The news media gave the U.S. election far greater coverage than the Howard/Rudd contest in Australia. There has been a steady diet of media reporting and newspaper articles on the U.S. election since before the primaries, with coverage intensifying in the last month. Both major newspapers on November 6 devoted their editorial columns to the U.S. election; the New Zealand Herald's world section was expanded on November 6 and almost exclusively devoted to the U.S. election. One news station gave five hours of coverage to the election. No detail was too insignificant and there was great interest in the U.S. electoral college. The Consul General in Auckland was on television on November 5 explaining the electoral college system, and many New Zealanders understand the U.S. system better than most Americans.

16. (SBU) Press reaction has been highly positive, characterizing the historic nature of the election win of Obama and 2009 as a turning point for U.S. relations with the world. Many of the New Zealanders at the mission-sponsored

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events viewed the President-elect as a post-ideological/political figure and inspirational beyond U.S. borders. Obama's acceptance speech was quoted at length by all media outlets and given prominence by most commentators. On the implications of Obama's election on US-New Zealand relations, some journalists have focused on trade as an area where a Democratic Administration in Washington may not be as amenable to a trade agreement between the two countries.

Helen and John Who?

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17. (SBU) Overlapping with televised coverage of the U.S. election returns on the evening of November 5 was the third and final leaders debate between Helen Clark and John Key. The final debate between the two leaders was more restrained and polite than the other two, with both politicians seeking to wrap up their respective campaigns on a high note. Media pundits roundly gave the debate to Clark, although the public's attention has largely been diverted to the U.S. election. The debate came on while the U.S. Embassy party was still going on in Wellington, and we switched on one television to the debate for the remaining guests. No one bothered to watch, preferring to continue discussions about the U.S. election. Privately, several guests lamented that the New Zealand contest has lacked the spark and historic significance of the U.S. election.

18. (SBU) One recent poll shows voters preferring a National-led government with nearly 50 percent of the vote and a Labour-led government at 40.7 percent. If these results mirror Saturday's vote totals, National could form a government easily in the post-election period with the support of the two minor parties (Act and United Future) who have already indicated a willingness to join in a National-led government. Both Clark and Key drew encouragement from the U.S. election results. Helen Clark said the Democratic victory signalled a move to the left in the United States, while John Key compared the mood for change in the U.S. to that in New Zealand.

Comment

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¶9. (SBU) New Zealanders have warmly welcomed Barack Obama's election and the Embassy and ConGen Auckland have received overwhelmingly positive feedback for hosting events on the U.S. election night. The crowds at both sites were strongly pro-Obama, and there was a sense of delight and amazement at how America could reinvent itself with a President from less-than-optimal circumstances. The most repeated sentiment was "this could only happen in America."

MCCORMICK